



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

April 2006



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Socio-economic Series 06-007

CAI
MH3
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R007

THE TRANSFERABILITY OF THE "SAFE IN THE CITY" APPROACH TO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION IN CANADA

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this study was to examine the transferability of Safe in the City (SITC), based in London, England, to the Canadian context. SITC was set up in 1998 by the Peabody Trust and Centrepoint, a charity working with homeless and socially excluded youth. The goals of SITC were to help young people stay safely at home; find alternative options for young people who cannot remain safely at home; and develop the life skills and employability of young people to enable them to make a smooth transition to independent lifestyles.

SITC was of particular interest for a number of reasons

- The project was undertaken by a non-governmental organization (NGO).
- The initiative was geographically based—targeting neighbourhoods that had been identified as especially vulnerable to production of youth homelessness.
- The initiative made use of existing resources, building on what existed in the neighbourhood and strengthening coordination between organizations.

However, a major change occurred in the course of this research project – the ending of SITC after six years of operation. Nonetheless, it was decided to proceed with the research, since the essence of the initiative remained unchanged and the lessons could still be applicable to the Canadian context. The project was slightly enlarged to review another similar project, Safe Moves, also based in England and still in operation.

FINDINGS

Safe in the City

SITC operated in eight London boroughs identified according to an index of deprivation. Recognizing that preventing homelessness needed to tackle the multiple factors that lead to homelessness, a "cluster" scheme was developed. To ensure that young people received all the services they needed, clusters joined up separate agencies that delivered services. The three elements of the intervention, common to all cluster schemes, were:

- Family support: based on the belief that the best place for a youth was with the family until they were ready to make a planned and safe move (unless the home was unsafe because of violence or abuse); this aspect of the work included family mediation and resolution of crisis situations.
- Personal development: this work included improving self-esteem, communication and independent living skills.
- Skills and employability: tailored learning plans were developed to help young people improve their chances of finding and keeping employment.

While the clusters were coordinated centrally by SITC, one of the cluster agencies acted as lead partner and coordinator locally, responsible for building referral routes as well as developing referral agreements and strategic links to ensure that they were part of "localized delivery." A "gatekeeping" tool was developed to identify whether a youth was eligible for services from the cluster scheme.

Safe in the City: Gatekeeping Tool

To be eligible for services, youth had to have at least two of the following risks:

1. Ever run away from home
2. Family in severe or chronic poverty
3. Excluded or at risk of exclusion from school
4. Problems at home
5. Disrupted home history

SITC stopped operations in 2004 when the major source of funding ended. A number of key informants from agencies that had participated in the cluster schemes were interviewed about the impact of SITC. Key informants generally had a positive view and some partner agencies planned to incorporate the SITC approach, expand their mandate to include work that had been undertaken by other partners in the cluster, or continue the partnerships.



An evaluation of the experiences of youth who had participated in SITC, undertaken by Centrepoint and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, revealed that the family support work was highly beneficial and that the personal development aspect of the scheme had helped the youth. There was also an impact on housing stability: some who had left home went back, while others, still at home, stated that they were now less likely to run away.

Safe Moves

The SITC model was adapted by the Foyer Federation in its Safe Moves project, which began in 2002 as an 18-month pilot in four locations, two urban and two rural, with a modest total budget of £300,000. The objective was to explore the cluster model in a different context, including a large geographical area. Youth 13–19 were targeted and a package of three core services was offered: life skills training, family mediation and support, and peer mentoring. Support to independent accommodation was available if needed.

An evaluation of the pilot revealed that, as with SITC, while the goal of preventing youth homelessness was understood by all the partners, transforming this into specific objectives was sometimes challenging. Safe Moves has become a permanent program and new projects are being developed in various locations.

The transferability of Safe in the City

There are a number of key lessons from SITC that could be applicable to the Canadian situation.

- *The cluster model*

The advantage of the cluster model was that it identified key elements that were necessary to prevent homelessness: family mediation, personal development, and skills and education. The emphasis was to provide a seamless service to help youth gain access to all these facets of the program, while responding to their “service fatigue.” However, the program was expensive—both financially (in part related to the need to support a central office that had research and policy activities) and in terms of time to coordinate the work. The annual SITC budget averaged £275,000 a year per cluster (about \$550,000 in Canadian currency). The Safe Moves project demonstrates that a more modest approach can work, although more resources at the start-up phase and more national coordination and exchange between various programs are desirable.

- *Localized application*

By being based in local communities or boroughs, SITC was able to bring together local partners, often those who had credibility in the community and could more easily attract the youth. A localized approach also allowed SITC to recognize and adapt to the needs of particular situations, such as significant proportions of ethnic and minority youth.

- *Understanding of homelessness prevention*

Both SITC and Safe Moves were confronted with having to understand and share with partners what homelessness “prevention” meant and how this knowledge could be translated into action. In both instances this proved to be a challenge in the initial phases of the work but also appears to be one of the lasting legacies of SITC. Key informants spoke of a deeper understanding of the influences leading to homelessness and the need for a holistic approach and integrated services.

- *The assessment/gatekeeping tool*

One of the most useful components of the SITC approach was the development and application of an assessment tool based on risk factors for homelessness to evaluate whether a young person was eligible for services. The assessment tool also helped identify agencies better suited to deal with youth who were not eligible for SITC.

Canadian Initiatives

When Canadian key informants were asked about initiatives that dealt with prevention of youth homelessness, either in terms of research, national initiatives or local projects, few were identified. Part of the difficulty may reflect the complexity of youth homelessness prevention and the fact that initiatives can be wide-ranging (e.g., family support, help in the transition out of care) and may not be identified as dealing with homelessness per se. This also may reflect the lack of knowledge and understanding of homelessness prevention, similar to the experiences of SITC and Safe Moves in the initial phases as partners struggled with understanding what homelessness prevention would look like.

Three categories of Canadian programs were identified:

- holistic programs that offer a range of services to youth that can include counselling, community work, residential services and independent living skills,
- projects that address the needs of specific groups, e.g., ethnic groups or gay/lesbian/ bisexual/transgendered youth, and
- family reconnection.

Implementing youth homelessness prevention:

The challenges

The SITC and Safe Moves initiatives as well as research identify a number of challenges in undertaking a youth homelessness prevention project.

- *Prevention as a priority and demonstration of benefits*

Some U.K. key informants stated that one of the challenges in implementing prevention programs was the difficulty of demonstrating that prevention works. It requires that people invest in the long term, since it can take years before there is empirical evidence of impact.

- **Labels and stigma**

One of the issues that arises in undertaking work to prevent youth homelessness is that of labelling the initiative as homelessness prevention. Youth have been found to resist the term homeless and may not use services labelled as such. Any initiative that would undertake youth homelessness prevention would need to carefully consider how it is labelled. Related to this might be where it is physically located. While there might be advantages to being located in services or facilities for homeless youth (thereby reaching those who may be “trying out” street life), others who avoid the label or might be in an earlier stage of the process might not be reached.

- **Negative past experiences**

Key informants from SITC spoke of “service fatigue” among some youth who had been exposed to other interventions and the ensuing challenge of demonstrating that their project was different. Research indicates that this attitude is frequent. One of the key elements that seems to have helped SITC overcome service fatigue was the relationship that key workers could establish with the youth. Success with youth who initially used the program led to an increase in word-of-mouth and self-referrals, attesting to the need for a long-term commitment on the part of funders and developers of programs.

Implementing youth homelessness prevention:

Existing strengths

A number of factors, inherent to the youth themselves as well as the capacity of Canadian community organizations, are positive elements in implementing youth homelessness prevention.

- **The optimism and resilience of youth**

While there are difficulties with using the term homeless, and resistance on the part of youth to be identified as such, some of the resistance also reflects strengths: not using homelessness services can be seen as a sign of refusing to adopt an identity that is negative and highly stigmatized while maintaining a sense of self and self-respect. In many instances, youths see their homelessness as transitory, a stage in the process of independence. Youth are also optimistic; research reveals that they express hope for the future and believe that their situations will change. Studies reveal that youth often felt there was no alternative to the street and the decision to leave home was one that affirmed their capacity and control over the situation. Support that is given to youth would need to acknowledge that their situation is temporary and that they have strengths and power.

- **The process of becoming homeless can take time**

The sociological concept of a homeless “career” could be integrated into prevention work. The early stages of the “push” towards the street have been shown to last a significant period of time. During the contemplation stage, in which the youth realizes that

the situation they are in is no longer tenable, they will inform themselves about survival strategies and undertake trial periods. This is an optimal time to give them information about their options.

- **The experience of Canadian community organizations**

Numerous Canadian studies, project descriptions and best practices, as well as the impetus provided by the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) to develop homelessness plans, have resulted in a strong capacity on the part of community organizations to work collaboratively and to build networks to pull together a wide range of services necessary to deal with complex problems. In many ways, some of the work required to set up clusters (as in SITC) or partnerships (as in Safe Moves) has been accomplished already.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has revealed that the issue of homeless youth in Canada is not very different from that in other countries. The causes, the characteristics, and the behaviour patterns all seem to be similar, as is the need to find strategies to prevent the occurrence of homelessness. While there are strong indications that structural factors play an important role in the development of homelessness and that universal measures are the most effective response, the focus of this study has been on a more targeted response to one specific group.

The SITC model is one that could be adapted to the Canadian context although the Safe Moves adaptation, with lower costs, might be more sustainable. However, there are challenges to implementation of such a program. The first is the need for acknowledgment and support from governments. There is a danger that Canadians slide into a situation where homelessness is considered an unavoidable component of present-day society. There needs to be a commitment to the idea that this is not inevitable and that means can be found to prevent its occurrence. For example, it may be worth examining the approach and the impact of the 2002 Homeless Act in the U.K. which requires that prevention be included in homelessness plans. A review of Canadian local plans to incorporate homelessness prevention would be useful.

The other major challenge is the need for more research in areas that are required to support prevention. There is a need for

- **Better understanding of pathways and risk factors for Canadian youth**

While a few recent Canadian studies have undertaken this type of analysis, this is still relatively little understood. In order to assess risk and implement prevention programs, there is a need for information about where homeless young people come from: without an understanding of neighbourhoods where risk is higher, broad prevention programs that take family, school and social networks into account cannot be put into place.

- *Better understanding of family reconnection and support/mediation*
Relatively little is known about family reconnection and findings from existing studies can be contradictory. There is a need to understand the impact of family reunification and situations under which this is desirable and those where such measures may not be sustainable, or may even put youth into further danger. It would be important to know the views of front-line services about family support and mediation, including obstacles or dangers that they might see from initiatives that take a more interventionist approach. Related to this are policies and programs around runaway youth, including the protocol with parents.

- *Asking youth what would have helped*

Finally, there is a need to know from homeless youth what would have helped them when they first contemplated leaving home or left home. Canadian research is increasingly giving "voice" to homeless persons and, in this case, policy and programs would greatly benefit from the hard-earned wisdom of homeless youth. Furthermore, the perspective of families and parents about the supports that were or are needed would be invaluable in developing a prevention strategy.

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This project was funded (or partially funded) by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) under the terms of the External Research Program (ERP), an annual research grant competition. The views expressed are the personal views of the author(s) and do not represent the official views of CMHC. For more information on the ERP, please visit the CMHC website at www.cmhc.ca or contact the Project Officer, Responsive Programs by e-mail at erp@cmhc-schl.gc.ca, or by regular mail: Project Officer, Responsive Programs, External Research Program, Policy and Research Division, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 700 Montreal Road, Ottawa ON K1A 0P7.

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Produced by CMHC

18-04-06

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